

# THE SQUIRREL

BY MARY E. WILKINS

THE Squirrel lived with his life-long mate near the farm-house.

He considered himself very rich, because he owned an English walnut tree. Neither he nor his mate had the least doubt that it belonged to them and not to the Farmer. There were not many like it in the State or the whole country. It was a beautiful tree, with a mighty spread of branches full of gnarled strength. Nearly every year there was a goodly promise of nuts, which never came to anything, so far as the people in the farm-house were concerned. Every summer they looked hopefully at the laden branches, and said to each other, "This year we shall have nuts," but there were never any. They could not understand it. But they were old people; had there been boys in the family it might have been different. Probably they would have solved the mystery. It was simple enough. The Squirrel and his mate considered the nuts as theirs, and appropriated them. They loved nuts; they were their natural sustenance; and through having an unquestioning, though unwitting, belief in Providence, they considered that nuts which grew within their reach were placed there for them as a matter of course. There were the Squirrels, and there were the nuts. No nuts, no Squirrels! The conclusion was obvious to such simple intelligences.

As soon as the nuts were ripe the Squirrel and his mate were busy all day, gathering the nuts, and then carrying them in their swollen cheek pouches to their little storehouse under the wood-pile. Back and forth they sped with such smooth swiftness that it was no more perceptible than the passing of a beam of light.

The Squirrels were very near the color tones of the tree, which, moreover, held its leaves late; only a boy would have been likely to spy them out.

"It is a strange thing about those

nuts," the Farmer's Wife often said to her husband, peering up at the tree with her dim old eyes, and he assented. The old couple were given to sitting out on their porch after supper as long as the evenings were warm enough, and it was a late autumn that year. There were occasional frosts, but summerlike days between.

The Farmer and his Wife were a fond old couple. They had never had any children, and the sympathy of their own natures had drawn them more closely together through the long years. They looked and thought alike. If anything, the Wife had the stronger nature of the two, but both of them were gentle, yet with a certain wariness and shrewdness, not unlike that of the Squirrels. They were very careful of their money, and saved every penny, and had made considerable provision for their old age. They looked forward to nothing except perfect peace and comfort on this earth for the rest of their lives, and as for what would come after—they had a religious hope.

They had always looked at their English walnut tree and speculated as to what could have become of the nuts, but the speculation did not disturb them at all. They took things which had happened for some time easily, being gently conservative to the bone. "Seems as if them nuts must drop off that tree and be picked up," said the Farmer, "but there ain't no boys."

"No, there ain't no boys," said his Wife.

Sometimes the Farmer used to walk about under the tree and look on the ground for fallen nuts, and his Wife did likewise, but they never found any. They were not aware of four of the keenest eyes of watchfulness and wariness in the whole world intent upon them from some corner of hiding. Now and then they saw one of the Squirrels slipping along the stone wall, and looked at him with

that interest which always attaches to a Squirrel, perhaps because the swiftness of his passing from observation gives him a certain rarity and preciousness. Sometimes the Farmer's Wife observed one sitting upright on the wall, holding a nut in his fore paws and nibbling at it boldly. "Maybe he has got one of our walnuts," said she.

"He couldn't get the whole treeful," said the Farmer.

"No, he couldn't," assented the Wife.

The capacity of the Squirrels for excelling in their given walk of life was as much of a secret to them as was theirs to the Squirrels.

It was in the bright, clear morning that they oftenest caught glimpses of the Squirrels, for the morning was their period of fullest life and activity. Then, when the smell of passing leaves and ripened fruit was in the air, and the grass was white and crisp with something between frost and dew, did the Squirrels feel their joy of life to the utmost. They darted hither and yon, mostly unobserved, since they could fairly outspeed human observation. Not a nut on the tree, not one that fell, escaped them. They went to and fro between the tree and their hoard under the wood-pile. They were very rich indeed. That year there had been nearly a bushel of nuts on the English walnut tree, and they garnered them all. The same delight in their providence, and sense of self-gratulation, and security as to the future, were over them as over the old couple in the farm-house. They too looked forward to peace and comfort on earth; as for the unknown future, they did not dream it existed. They had no religious hope, but their utter lack of questioning made them too trustful for any anxiety. They had no premonitions of a future stage when there might be no stone walls for running along, and no nut trees, and yet Squirrels. Their needs and their supplies were entretics not to be separated by any conception of theirs.

When they had garnered every nut from the English walnut tree they were indeed an opulent pair. They were, of course, acquainted with other Squirrels, but none of them approached themselves in point of richness. None of the others had English walnuts, and none had such

a plentiful store. They looked forward to a winter of fatness and luxury and love, for the two little creatures loved each other as faithfully as did the old couple in the farm-house. None of the other Squirrels knew of their hiding-place under the wood-pile, nobody had discovered the cunning passage which led to it. It was the last of October, and they felt perfectly secure. They had reached that point, so seldom reached by either Men or Squirrels, when care as to material things is over. Then came the day of their downfall.

The Farmer's Wife thought that the wood-pile should be taken down, and the wood split and stored in the shed before winter set in, and the Farmer obediently began the task. It was not a large pile, and he was too thrifty to hire help. He chopped away patiently day after day, but it was a long time before the Squirrels fairly took alarm for the safety of their store. They had grown to believe in its impregnability, and the impregnability of their right of possession. They kept out of the way while the old man was at work, scampering in the autumn woods, enjoying themselves, and always with the thought of their bountiful provision for the future in mind.

At last they began to grow anxious. They hung aloof and chattered angrily. They sat on the stone wall with great tails arching over their backs, so near that the gentle old man thought they must be growing tame, and at last the blow fell.

One morning the Farmer discovered the Squirrels' hoard. He went into the house and told his Wife. "What d'ye think?" he said. "It was them Squirrels that have stole all them English walnuts."

"You don't say so!" said she.

"Yes, they have. Ther's nigh a bushel of them under the wood-pile."

"You don't say so!" said she again.

The old couple went out together and looked at the winter hoard of the other couple.

"Well," said the Farmer's Wife, "you'll have to get the bushel basket and pick them up and bring them into the house, and spread them out on the garret floor. It's the first time we've ever had any nuts off that tree. I declare,

them Squirrels have been stealing them all this time!"

The old man hesitated. He was as thrifty as his Wife, and had as great a pleasure in possessions, but he had more points of view. "Seems kind of too bad when they've worked so hard," he remarked.

"Why is it too bad? Ain't they our nuts?" said his Wife, with wonder in her soft eyes. "They've stole our nuts."

"Well," said the old man.

He got the bushel basket and gathered up the nuts. There was distracted, but wary, comment from the Squirrels. They skirmished about on the stone wall, and watched this run upon their little bank with unavailing chatters of protest. At this time, if they had had faith, they might have lost it. At the beginning of winter the Squirrel and his mate, no longer young, were thrown upon the world penniless, and all their season's labor was lost.

When the nuts were all heaped up on the garret floor the old man and his Wife looked at them. The old man was still doubtful. "It seems most too bad, when they've worked so hard, don't it?" he said, with a break in his voice.

"Ain't they our nuts, and didn't they steal them?" returned his Wife. She was as kindly as her husband except when it came to questions of sheer justice, then she was pitiless.

But the old man was still anxious. All that day he had an eye upon the frenzied Squirrels darting hither and thither along the wall, with occasional peeps of unbelief that the worst was true, at their violated storehouse. That night he went down to the village store and purchased a bushel of shagbarks, and brought them home, leaning painfully to one side with their weight. He stole out to the wood-pile, all unseen by his Wife, and deposited them in the Squirrels' hiding-place. The next day, and several days after that, he had an attack of rheumatism and was unable to chop wood.

Then a light snow came, the first of the season, and he said to his Wife that he didn't know but it might be just as well to leave the rest of that wood-pile for a while, seeing as he was so lame in his joints and the wood was so wet, and the shed nigh about full anyway. And she as-

sented, saying that she guessed there was about enough wood in the shed to last till spring, and she didn't want him to get any more cold, and it cost so much to hire. She suspected nothing about the shagbarks and the Squirrels, and the old man did not tell her, though he felt guilty. He had never been in the habit of concealing anything from his faithful old helpmeet, not even his good deeds. But there are some deeds which are too intimate with one's self and God for even the listening ear of human love, and too much a part of the soul for even wedlock to unveil. Then, too, the old man was afraid that his Wife would think that he had been extravagant.

That winter the Farmer used often to gaze out of the window from behind his Wife's blooming row of geraniums, and think with a sensation which was like a warmth in his soul how the Squirrels were supplied with plenty for their needs until spring. But he crept out one day when his Wife was away and investigated, and not a nut was in the storehouse. He straightened his rheumatic back painfully and stared at the little empty cellar. Then the chatter of a Squirrel struck his dull ears. He looked for a long time, and finally spied him sitting on the stone wall, eying him with the wariest eyes of incipient motion, his tail already stiffened for flight.

"Wonder if that's one of 'em?" thought the old man. He could not know that the Squirrel and his mate had moved all their new store of nuts to another hiding-place in the woods at the foot of a birch-tree, because they were filled with suspicion and distrust of him. His restitution was nothing. What were shagbarks to English walnuts? They were of an inferior quality anyway, and how did they alter the fact of the appropriation of the others?

The gentle old man whistled. "Be you the thief?" he asked.

Then the Squirrel began to chatter fiercely at the Farmer, though he was always ready to fly at his slightest motion. The frosty air seemed to fairly shiver and shake with that tiny volley of accusation. There was the thief who had stolen the store which had been provided for himself and his mate by the Providence which had created them. There was the

thief who had sinned doubly, both against them and that Providence which had shaped both their need and their supply.

Finally the old man went back to his house, and the Squirrel slipped swiftly away along the stone wall towards his secret dwelling.

When the Farmer's Wife returned, she proposed cracking some of the English walnuts. "They must be dry enough now," she said. So the old man brought down some from the garret, and fell to work. "I dun'no' as I want any," he remarked as he pounded. "I never did care much about nuts anyway, and somehow I've always felt as if we'd stole

the Squirrels' after they'd worked so hard."

"How silly you be!" said his Wife, but she looked at him lovingly. "You were always too tender-hearted for your own good. Talk about stealing, it was the Squirrels that stole our nuts."

But the Squirrel and his mate, whose ancestors had held the whole land, and the fruit thereof, in feudal tenure to the Creator of it all, since the beginning of things, had different views. They were in the woods champing their supper of shagbarks, and often finding a wormy one, and they considered that the Farmer had stolen their nuts.